

## **CHAPTER 18**

### **HOUSEHOLD EMPLOYEES**

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The idea of having domestic staff can be disconcerting for Foreign Service employees and family members. In our theoretically egalitarian society, words such as "servant" or worse, "houseboy" raise specters of bygone eras.

There are a few different factors in play overseas:

- Daily tasks may require great effort—even without any language barriers that may exist. Instead of sticking a frozen dinner in the microwave, you may need to ask what to buy and how to cook it, make a trip to the local market, bargain for unfamiliar produce, carefully wash and disinfect it, wait for a power outage to end, and only then begin cooking supper. Having someone reliable to help can make life in a hard place easier.
- Hiring someone can help the local economy by providing another job; it can be an effective way to share your income without promoting dependence.
- Household employees may provide a window into the local culture or a part of society that you may not see as a Foreign Service employee or family member, enriching your experience and broadening your understanding of the country.
- Help at home can free up time for other activities and enable representational events in your residence, opportunities to get to know the country, and meaningful volunteer work.

## **DETERMINE YOUR REQUIREMENTS**

Do not feel that you have to hire your predecessor's employees or the first person recommended to you by the CLO Coordinator. Take the time to determine your requirements first. Do you need someone full-time or part-time? Do you want someone to cook? Local or American foods? Will you need help on evenings or weekends? Do you need child care? How many hours per week? Will the employee need to take care of your pets, take telephone messages, shop for food, manage other employees? Does the employee need to speak English? How well? Do you want a live-in maid? Would you mind employing additional family members? Think about these and other factors before asking for recommendations.

## **PLAN THE POSITION**

Although you may have diplomatic immunity, your employees will expect you to abide by local labor practices. Find out in advance what is normal in terms of working hours, holidays, benefits, bonuses, and so on. Getting a sample contract may be helpful. This research will eliminate unpleasant or expensive surprises down the road.

Check with others at post to determine an appropriate salary. Pay will depend on the local pay scale, the size of your house and family, the employee's experience, and the scope of duties. Choosing the cheapest employee may mean sacrificing experience and maturity; it may be worth paying more.

Be clear before you interview anyone what you intend to provide in the way of fringe benefits. What is expected? (In some countries, employers provide personal hygiene products such as soap and shampoo for live-in employees, along with room and board). Which items will the employee be allowed to use? Will you pay for sick days or emergency absences? Will you help the family by providing school uniforms or other extras? What will the limits be? Will you loan money or provide salary advances? These points can be included in a written contract if agreed.

Your employees most likely will face personal problems at some point, and it may be difficult for you to ignore them (for example, if your live-in housekeeper has a baby, can the two both continue to live with you?) It helps if you have thought in advance about how you prefer to handle difficult situations.

## **GET RECOMMENDATIONS**

The best way to find an honest, reliable employee is to get recommendations from previous employers, the CLO Coordinator or Administrative Officer, or other

acquaintances at your new post. Even if the employee has excellent recommendations, take the time to follow good hiring practices as below.

## **INTERVIEW POTENTIAL CANDIDATES**

Prior to interviewing candidates, prepare and photocopy a list of questions that are relevant to your needs. Use it at each interview to help you select the best candidate. Be uniform in seeking information from prospective candidates. (Contact your CLO in advance to obtain copies of any papers it may have regarding the employees you will be interviewing and attach them to each questionnaire.)

Factors to determine (either at the interview or in advance) include:

1. Past employment: what, where, how long, duties, reasons for leaving
2. Education: languages spoken, ability to read and write (which may not be as important as you initially think), skills for any other job requirements
3. Specific position-related skills and training.
4. Cultural factors if relevant to employment. (For instance, you might not want to hire people from different ethnic groups in a country where this could be a problem. Hire the employee with primary responsibility first, then do the rest of the hiring in such a way as to avoid potential friction.)
5. Family situation if this is relevant to employment (for instance, if a live-in housekeeper wants to have five children live with her)
6. Health and hygiene habits of potential candidates

Clearly explain the duties that you expect and the salary and benefits you are prepared to offer. Establish a professional tone at the interview. Use the formal verb form if there is one.

Pay attention to how comfortable you feel with the person—this is someone you may see every day. If you are favorably impressed with the prospective employee, suggest a paid trial period rather than immediate employment.

## **TAKE CARE WITH CHILDCARE**

Following are a few topics to discuss when interviewing potential childcare providers:

- Education and training
- Experience
- References
- Caregiving philosophies and goals
- Ideas on meals, snacks and drinks for infants and children
- Preferred treatment for common childhood ailments (to find out if there are local practices with which you are not comfortable)
- Usual activities planned or typical daily schedule
- Use of television/videos if available

- Philosophies on naps or quiet time
- Discipline methods, rules and behavior expectations
- (if relevant) Willingness and experience caring for children with special needs

It may be helpful to interview the potential employee without children present, then schedule a time for the employee to meet the child. A few hours of babysitting while parents are still in the house (for example, unpacking or working on other projects) may give a good idea of how the potential caregiver interacts with your child.

Be sure to check references; stop by unexpectedly at times when your children are under the caregivers' supervision; and listen carefully to what your children say.

Remember that the housekeeper or cook is not necessarily the best person to watch your children. Cooking, cleaning, and caring for children at the same time may not be optimal for safety reasons, and the employee could resent the change in responsibilities, if unexpected.

## **PROTECT YOUR FAMILY**

Obtain the potential employee's full name, address, and any identification number (such as Social Security number). Ask the Regional Security Officer to conduct a background investigation if one has not been done recently.

Ask the post medical unit which medical tests are recommended. Arrange for a complete medical examination, chest x-ray, or other recommended procedures for the potential employee; you are responsible for the cost. You may want to take the employee to this examination, both to make it more convenient for your employee and to make sure that he or she does not send someone else instead.

Do not just ask for references: check them. Take the time to call previous employers and ask detailed questions. Read letters of reference carefully and attempt to verify what they say with the writers—even if they have since moved to a new post.

## **WRITTEN DOCUMENTATION**

If it is common locally, or even just for yourself, you might want to have all possible scenarios covered in writing to avoid misunderstandings and legal problems. Write down a list of what you may expect from the employee and what the employee may expect from you. Be as specific as possible regarding duties to be accomplished on a daily and monthly basis. Go over this list, reading it aloud to the employee and—once all parties agree—have the employee sign it as a contract addendum.

Establish a form that will serve as a monthly receipt of salary payments. Obtain the employee's signature upon each salary payment.

Establish a form regarding leave/vacation to keep track of yearly leave taken/paid. Some countries' laws require a 13th (at times even a 14<sup>th</sup>) monthly salary, and this form serves as proof that—at year's end—the employer covered all local legal requirements. Have the employee sign this form as proof that s/he received due payment/benefits.

Establish a folder and keep (at a minimum) copies of the employee's identification documents, documentation of health check ups, residence address and telephone numbers, two additional points of contact in case the employee cannot be reached, insurance/social security payment receipts, salary log, and so forth.

## **TRAIN EMPLOYEES**

The importance of this step cannot be overemphasized. If you need to, spend an entire day or two completing all of the required tasks with the new employee. Do not make assumptions about what employees know, even if they have worked for other American families. Go over the use of each appliance. Point out which ones require a transformer or other special treatment. You may want to put labels in the local language on the machines, clearly and simply noting controls and requirements. Indicate how laundry should be separated, which items should be washed by hand or line-dried, and how often to use products such as bleach or fabric softener. Show them how to wash special dishes, such as non-stick pans. Point out which cleaners should be used for each task. Make sure that cloths or brushes used for bathrooms and floors never come near dishes or food preparation surfaces. Go over procedures for safe food and water handling with all employees, at least in brief—the last thing you want is for the gardener to helpfully take the initiative and refill your bottle of purified water from the tap.

Make sure that the new nanny knows your rules regarding television time, snacks, naps, and so on. Indicate if there are foods or drinks that you do not want your child to have (in many cultures it is considered fine to give children coffee, tea, or alcoholic beverages, for instance). Arrange for first aid training if possible. At the very least, provide emergency contact information and go over what to do in case of choking, poisoning, and so on.

A very real and unexpected problem for some families is the fact that household help may wait on children hand and foot, allowing them to do whatever they want. Avoid this by reminding both the employee and child that the employee is in charge and should be respected. Continue to assign children household chores and responsibilities, so that they will not be too shocked by a later return to "real life," and maintain a healthy respect for your household help.

Make sure employees know where emergency numbers are located and which device to use in case of emergency (telephone or radio). Instruct employees not to give out information about the family to incoming callers unless they are SURE that the caller is a friend or relative. Employees should know the full names of everyone in the family in case of emergency. Do not allow employees to allow entry onto your compound or in your house of anyone who you have not specifically approved.

Insist that employees accompany any workmen, exterminators or others who want to enter the house, after verifying that they have legitimate work orders. Remind them that exterminators should not spray food preparation surfaces or cupboards containing pots and pans, dishes or food.

Be clear about your expectations regarding the use of your possessions and your home. Which food is all right to eat? Can the employee use the telephone, television or radio? When can family or friends stop by, if ever?

If you do not speak the language well, or if the employee does not speak English well, you may want to enlist a friend to interpret or write out instructions in the employee's language. You may be able to physically demonstrate many tasks, but be sure that important points have been understood.

## **LEARN TO LIVE TOGETHER**

Respect the culture of your employees. For example, do not ask Muslims to cook or serve pork. Do not expect your female housekeeper to give the male gardener orders if this is not the norm. Do not expect people to clean up after pets if this is offensive to them.

Do not leave expensive items or cash lying around; why provide temptation? On the other hand, do not blame the employee for everything that you cannot find. (Did you ever lose anything before you had someone working for you?)

Remember that an employee living in your house is neither a friend nor a guest. Americans may try to ease ambivalent feelings about "servants" by trying to treat employees as part of the family. This may be confusing and ultimately unfair to everyone involved. Many Foreign Service families recommend maintaining distance by using the formal verb tense, having different meal times, keeping living areas separate, and so on. This is a work relationship, after all.

Be realistic in your expectations: no one is going to raise your children the same way that you do or iron your shirts exactly the way the dry cleaner did in Bethesda. Express appreciation, compliment work well done, and be generous when it is appropriate. This is much more effective—and easier on your and your help's nerves—than constant complaints or criticisms.

## **AVOID PROBLEMS**

If you need to dismiss employees, do not give them notice; ask for the keys, give them the required severance pay, and ask them to leave. Try to avoid firing someone in a moment of anger. Take the time to find out in advance what local regulations are and what the best way to handle the situation in the context of the local culture. "Saving face"

may be important in some cultures; in other countries you may need a signed statement from the employee saying that he or she has been paid in full. Regardless of the reason, try to avoid firing someone before a major holiday.

If an employee is terminated for cause (stealing or inappropriate behavior), help prevent problems for future employers by documenting the behavior and sending a brief report to the Regional Security Officer and CLO Coordinator.

## **ENJOY!**

It may sound overwhelming to make all these arrangements to have people working in your home. However, the first time you serve Thanksgiving dinner to fifteen people, leave on vacation the next morning, and come back refreshed to a spotless house, the complications will not seem so great after all!